

From Myth to Reality: An Exploration of the Social and Cultural Significance of the Goddess Durga in Bengali Society

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Abstract: *Apart from having religious significance, the Goddess Durga and the rituals surrounding her have great social and cultural importance among the Bengali Hindu community of Bangladesh. Drawing on oral interviews and published materials, this paper examines how the myth of Durga works in various social discourses carrying distinctive social and cultural meanings within the Bengali Hindu community. It also explores the social and cultural significance of various ritualistic performances surrounding Durga, along with considering the changing trends in those ritualistic performances, which indicate the different social and cultural positions of Durga in contemporary Bengali society. This research is informed by qualitative methodologies, folklore scholarship, discourse analysis and performance study.*

Keywords: *Durga, Myth, Discourse analysis, Performance, Bengali Hindu Community.*

Introduction

The mythological representation of Durga in various popular and sacred narratives carries multiple social and cultural meanings within the Hindu community of Bangladesh. Durga is the primary goddess of Hinduism who has got multiple incarnations and possessed the power to appear on earth in the form of different deities. She is mainly known as the goddess with three eyes and ten hands that symbolize her powerful nature. In popular myths or sacred narratives, Durga is depicted as the female warrior who destroys the power of a buffalo demon called Mahishasura. It is popularly known that a north Indian prince, Rama, invoked the goddess Autumn's help to win a battle against a demon who was the ruler of the Southern Kingdom of Lanka. Due to Rama's invocation, Devi Durga appears as the protector and fights against the evil forces sitting astride a lion, thus establishing harmony in this world.

The followers of Hinduism, especially the Bengali community of Bangladesh and West India, worship the clay image of Durga. Goddess Durga has great religious significance among the followers of Hinduism in Bangladesh. This paper examines the popular and sacred narratives surrounding Durga and how those narratives influence the everyday life of the Bengali Hindu community in Bangladesh. It also explores the social and cultural implications of the ritualistic performances that occur during the *Durga Puja*, the largest festival for the Bengali Hindu community in Bangladesh. Lastly, it reveals the changing trends observed in conceptualizing Durga in the contemporary period. While mainly focussing on a mythological character like the goddess Durga, this paper reveals the power of myth to shape our real-life experiences.

Methodology

This paper combines oral interviews and published secondary sources. Fifteen semi-structured oral interviews were conducted in August 2021 to complete the project successfully. Both male and female participants from different rural and urban places in the Cumilla district of Bangladesh contributed to the research. All the participants are followers of Hinduism. Participants were asked about their knowledge of the goddess Durga and their social and cultural experiences surrounding the goddess Durga. The age of the participants ranges from fifteen years to sixty years. Interviews were recorded digitally. The interviews were transcribed in English to get a sense of the data. Through the reading and rereading of the transcriptions, appropriate themes (that express the participants' lived experiences) were identified. With a comprehensive understanding of the interview data, this research embraces a critical and in-depth interpretation of the data in the light of the relevant and available secondary sources. This research has relied on folklore scholarship, discourse analysis and performance study for the theoretical framework.

Myth Vs Reality

In the essay, “The problem of defining myth,” Lauri Honko defines myth as “a story of gods, religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events, the exemplary deeds of gods as a result of which the world, nature and culture were created together with all parts thereof and given their order, which still obtains” (Honko, 1984). Honko’s definition of myth coincides with the mythologies of Durga. Durga is a Sanskrit name which means a fort, an inaccessible place. In Hindu Puranas (a vast literary collection of myths,

folktales and legends), Durga is depicted as a protective goddess. She eliminates the sufferings of human beings giving a proper order to this earth. Durga is always represented as well-armed because of her militant nature and zeal to fight against evil. Honko reads myths as the symbols and representations. He argues that myth may not always be understood by its literal meaning but rather by the social and cultural insights it represents. Therefore, the mythological representation of Durga in various discourses can be understood by the various social and cultural meanings prevalent within the Bengali Hindu community. Sumahan Bandyopadhyay depicts the traditional appearance of Durga as symbolic:

“The traditional image of Durgā depicts an ensemble of the goddess and her 2 daughters- Lakshmi and Saraswati and 2 sons- Ganesh and Kartick-with the husband Siva’s face overlooking them atop held in a single background scaffolding... Here the large idol of Durgā, slaying the buffalo- demon Mahiṣāsura, is seated on a lion with her 10 arms holding weapons respectively gifted to her by the gods. All these weapons have symbolic meaning...The idols are made of straw and clay. On the bamboo frame a structure of idol is made of straw on which layers of clay is plastered and smoothened to give the final form. Face, fingers and some other parts of the body are made in mold. After painting and drawing of eyes, the idol is decorated with appropriate clothing and ornaments made of sola pith or imitation jewelry.” (Bandyopadhyay, 2017)

Durga is often referred to as the three-eyed goddess. Her left eye symbolizes desire, whereas her right and middle eyes represent action and knowledge. In other interpretations, being an embodiment of nature, Durga’s left eye indicates the moon, whereas the right and mid eyes represent the sun and fire. Moreover, she carries a variety of weapons in her ten hands through which she fights against evil power. Each of her weapons has a symbolic meaning to Hinduism. She carries the conch shell symbolizing the mystic word ‘Om’ that indicates the name of the supreme god of Hinduism. She also holds the bow and arrows, representing her energy, potentiality and dynamic nature. Thunderbolt is another weapon representing her firmness and confidence in destroying the evils. The half-bloom lotus in one of her hands represents her spiritual quest against the greed and lust of the mundane world. The beautiful discus signifies her will to establish righteousness on the earth. The sword that Durga holds in one of her hands represents the sharpness of her knowledge. The trident symbolizes her power to alleviate physical, mental, and spiritual suffering. In Hindu art and iconography, Durga is often portrayed riding a tiger or a lion, representing her power, will and determination. Durga’s bold gesture symbolizes her power to confront evils without fear and encourages the followers of Hinduism to fight for righteousness:

“As a Goddess, Durga is an inspiration. She is an assemblage of beauty, knowledge, and strength. Durga teaches us to raise our voices against injustice and bring order to the world. If you look at the clay images of Durga, most of them represent her powerful nature. The followers of Hinduism are taught to carry Durga’s ideals in their hearts and are expected to reflect those ideals in their day-to-day life. We believe that Durga comes to this world once a year. However, her ideas are always with us.” (Interview with Sanchita, August 2021)

Honko suggests depicting religious stories as sacred or holy narratives. He argues that myth has always been viewed as an opposition to the absolute truth, which may raise questions about the story's authenticity. Honko’s definition of myth is relevant in elaborating the mythologies surrounding Durga. According to Honko, “[A] myth expresses and confirms society’s religious values and norms...the ritual acting out of myth implies the defence of the world order; by imitating sacred example, the world is prevented from being brought to chaos” (Honko, 1984). In *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Catherine M. Bell argues that “Myth is no longer myth, it becomes literature or art...myth as a matter of belief, symbols, and ideas.” (Bell, 2009) is often manifested in the life experiences of human beings. Durga has always been considered a sacred figure for the Bengali Hindu community. In Hinduism, Durga is synonymous with divine justice and the saviour of people in distress. In the cultural, religious, and societal context of the Bengali Hindu community, Durga’s battle with the demon represents her struggle to save the earth from negative emotions (anger, jealousy, pride, greed and ignorance). Durga has been the symbol of women's empowerment and liberation and acts as the destroyer of evil forces. She is often called as ‘Shakti Devi’ (Goddess of power), who plays the role of a protector of the universe:

“Durga is popularly known for her strength. We call her *Shakti Devi*. It is believed that God has made Durga with extreme power and knowledge to emancipate the world from all kinds of negativities. I have found her empowering and liberating as a Bengali Hindu woman.” (Interview with Nipa in August 2021)

However, in traditional patriarchal discourses, Durga has a more domesticated portrayal, either as a mother goddess or a goddess of fertility. She is viewed as the personification of a mother, wife, divine protectress and chaste daughter. Durga is never a singular figure but instead always accompanied by her children. While discussing the dominant patriarchal narratives surrounding Durga, Devdutt Pattanaik includes that “Durga is constituted by the power or shakti (power) of various male gods. She kills a demon whom the gods cannot kill as a man cannot kill him. Here, her womanhood is thus the source of her power. The

demon wants to marry her, but she rebuffs his advance and kills him [...}. The narrative also describes Durga as the demure wife of Shiva [a male god of Hinduism] who, only when needed, and with the permission of her husband, can turn into her warrior self” (Pattanaik, 2016). As Sarah Mill argues, “Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct and constitute them” (Mills, 2004). Echoing Fairclough, Mill also states that, “discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief, neither of which is normally apparent to discourse participants’ (Mills, 2004). In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, a woman’s feminine identity is first constructed and then nurtured under the banner of various societal customs. Durga epitomizes the eternal condition of the married woman in the context of Bengali Hindu society. According to popular myth, Durga visits her parent’s place (earth) once a year during celebrations. Likewise, a Bengali Hindu woman needs to leave her parents’ home after marriage and is permitted to visit them occasionally:

“It is believed that the goddess Durga comes to visit her parents during the *Durga puja*. She visits the earth once a year and stays for five to seven days. This earth is believed to be her parental abode. Durga must leave as the veneration ends. Likewise, the social custom is that a woman must leave her parental abode during the marriage and visit them occasionally. I am not sure if such customs are maintained following Durga’s story. However, we can not deny the influence of Durga in the life of the followers of Hinduism.” (Interview with Pallab in August 2021).

In Bengali society, the power of Durga is often paralleled with the power of a Bengali woman to maintain the household. Durga represents the hardship that a Bengali woman is expected to take after her marriage. To ensure their feminine position within a patriarchal world, the Bengali Hindu women must actively negotiate with the socially imposed feminine roles. As Butler claims, “gender identity is not a manifestation of intrinsic essence but rather the product of actions and behaviours, that is, performance” (Butler, 1999). The creation of Durga as the role model through the traditional discourses structures the life of Bengali women within specific predetermined feminine performances. A Bengali Hindu woman needs to fulfil the role of a benevolent mother to fit herself within the traditional discourses of the patriarchal world:

“We call her mother Durga because, as a mother, she is very benevolent. She is an ideal mother figure for the Bengali Hindu community. Her family always accompanies her. A Bengali Hindu woman is expected to be compassionate towards her family. The role of a mother in a family is essential in the Bengali social context. Durga sets examples as a mother, and Bengali Hindu women are expected to follow her steps.” (Interview with Debika in August 2021)

Since Durga is viewed as a protective and nurturing cosmic mother, her destruction of the demonic suitors exemplifies the idea of resisting sexual desire outside of marriage and the importance of maintaining female chastity in a patriarchal Hindu world. The traditional concept of Bengali beauty is also exemplified through the sexualized feminine representation of Durga in Hindu mythologies:

“Durga is a personification of beauty for the Bengali Hindu community. The extreme fertility of Durga represents the idea of feminine fertility expected from all Hindu women. For me, Durga is more of a representative of upper-class fair women. The concept of beauty represented through Durga is not all-encompassing.” (Interview with Shen in August 2021)

Social and Ritualistic Performances Surrounding Durga

In honour of Durga, the most notable festival called “Durga Puja” (worshipping of Durga) is celebrated within the Bengali Hindu community of Bangladesh and India. It is held annually (in September or October), depending on the Hindu calendar. Worshipping of Goddess Durga is the largest festival among the Hindu community in Bangladesh. Depending on various places, the social and ritualistic performances of ‘Durga puja’ (ritual) continue for five to seven days. It is a public festival organized in an open public space within the neighbourhood. In preparation for “Durga Puja” (ritual), temporary shrines are created in each village, town and district, which epitomizes the idea of creating ‘sacred space, a place that could be filled only with symbolic activity’ (Koster, 2003). The shrines host the image of Durga made of clay, decorated with colourfully painted dresses, and richly adorned. Durga’s victory over evil is celebrated throughout the festival with special prayers, readings, decorations, and religious rituals.

Along with worshipping the Great Goddess, the festival indicates the veneration of life. The festival continues through the community members' various social and ritualistic performances. As Kapchan argues, ‘performance is public’ and assumes the values and beliefs of the community members (Kapchan, 2010). Likewise, the ‘Durga Puja’ (ritual) ensures community performance through the participation of the community members. The festival starts with establishing the clay image of the goddess in the clay Jar with a male Brahmin performing all the religious rituals. Within these ritualistic performance contexts, the devotees are not the passive audience but rather the active participant who seek blessings from the goddess by performing various rituals like gazing at the goddess's

image and worshipping her by ringing a bell and drum. Each day, during the festival ritual, the local devotees visit the temple, which houses the powerful image of the goddess. To show respect to the goddess, devotees bring offerings of flowers, fruits, nuts, and other unique foods. Through these ritualistic performances, social relations are established, and community is created and recreated:

“Durga Puja (ritual) is the largest religious festival for us. As it is arranged in an open public space, everyone, regardless of class, caste and religion, feels free to visit the Shrines. Although the participation in the rituals is limited to the followers of Hinduism, we share joy, happiness, and food with everyone from the community. Therefore, *Durga Puja* brings us closer to the Goddess and helps us establish intimate relationships with the community members.” (Interview with Kaushik in August 2021)

The Bengali Hindu community believes that the goddess's power is everywhere on water, earth, and life. As a part of the ritual, the priest performs a bathing rite to install energy in the clay image of the goddess through invocation, as it is believed that the goddess pays a visit to her parent's place during the festival. So, the bathing rite is an attempt of “[C]leansing the dirt accumulated through travel to the place of worship” (Rodrigues, 2003). Symbolically, it represents the idea of purification that prevailed in the Bengali Hindu community:

“The idols of Durga are usually made by the local idol makers and sold in the market. The organizers of the festival bought the idol from the market. When the idol is made, it does not have any life. The idol maker tries to make the idols as lively as possible. However, he can not install life in them. Life is installed by performing religious rituals around the idols. A religious priest will perform various rituals in the early mornings during the festival. One of the important rites is the bathing rite. This is a symbolic rite performed to purify both body and soul.” (Interview with Choyonika in August 2021)

Most of the ritualistic aspects of the festival indicate the idea of femininity that represents Durga as more of a woman than a goddess. On the festival's first day, a sacred vessel is worshiped as the goddess's womb, representing the goddess's generative power as a woman. The ritual proceeds through an anthropomorphic progression. According to Koster, “it has been fairly common to characterize ritual in terms of its dealings with human identity” (Koster, 2003). Different phases of a Bengali Hindu woman's identity are also depicted in the ritual process. A virgin girl is worshipped as an integral part of the ritual as it is believed that the goddess reveals herself as a living being in the virgin girl. Invocations of the goddess in different forms are considered important to the ritual as Durga is the embodiment of a chaste daughter, fertile female, ideal wife,

and mother. Another essential festival rite is the married woman's worshipping of the great goddess. The married women of the Hindu community gather in front of the image complex to feed the image and each other sweets. They also apply 'sindoor' (vermillion) to each other and the Goddess as a symbol of marriage. It is said that, in the wedding of Lord Shiva with Parvati (another name of Durga), lord Shiva applied 'Sindoor' on the head of Parvati. Since then, the ritual of applying 'sindoor' after the marriage has become an integral part of the Bengali Hindu woman's life. There is a common belief that if a married woman plays with 'sindoor' in front of the goddess, the goddess bestows grace and power. As Koster argues, "Ritual performances involve a repertoire of emotional and aesthetic phenomena, the understanding of which brings us to a deeper comprehension of what constitutes self and society" (Koster, 2003). The Hindu married daughters mark their identification with the goddess through this rite. The dramatic shift (from a virgin girl to a married woman) in the status of a woman within the Hindu Bengali community is depicted through these rites:

Sindoor Khela (playing with the vermillion) is my favourite part of the festival. The Hindu women from the community adorn themselves with beautiful clothes and jewellery to participate in the event. The event takes place almost at the end of the festival. The Hindu married women participate in *sindoor khela* to celebrate their marital status and pray for their husbands' long lives. I feel honoured and blessed while participating in *sindoor khela* every year since I married. This event is restricted to married women. Children and widows are not allowed to engage in the event." (Interview with Sanchita in August 2021)

Durga puja as a religious and social institution is enriched with specific practical rules to guide its followers from time to time. The popular ideologies and images of Durga teach them about their responsibilities in different phases of life. A Bengali Hindu woman needs to play the role of a chaste daughter in her early puberty and maintains the position of an ideal wife after marriage. Besides its religious significance, various ritualistic performances of the Durga puja are enacted to control the activities of the community members, emphasizing the importance of maintaining moral codes and social conventions. As Bandyopadhyay argues, "the rise of worship was the exercise of political control and expression social prestige...its growth has also been attributed to the emergence of new sites of the public sphere in neo-liberal economic conditions" (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). About two hundred years ago, *Durga puja* was a rural institution celebrated among the rural gentry who believed Durga was a fertility goddess. The common idea was that Durga must be awakened through worshipping as Durga was supposed to be sleeping. The upper-class Brahmin landlord used to organize the festival and social castes were

an important factor. However, this village network-based worship organized by big landlords was soon replaced by collective worship of the commons with the changes of modern times, which was marked by the independence from colonial rule. The universal worshipping of Durga began during the Anti-British movement with the idea to fight against injustice and attain freedom from a world of anarchy. In modern times, the social significance of the celebration has transformed from the representation of the hierarchy to the preservation of the community tradition. The awareness of civic rights during modern times is influential in making the celebration universal regardless of caste, class and gender. Gradually, the festival has become a means of nurturing and preserving modern urban sensibility. The ritual performances make the whole community aware of the sentiments towards the goddess. The celebration provides an opportunity to encounter the goddess in various forms, and the festival's long tradition binds together urban history and popular memory to create a recognizable future. It allows the whole community to unite and show solidarity as a single bounded moral community. It is the most significant public and popular aesthetic expression of Bengali culture.

The festival provides an opportunity to identify the Bengali Hindu community as a homogenous entity, which can be better understood within its territory. It has been a source of powerful emotions, a space for commentary, solidarity and public gatherings. As Rodrigues argues, “[T]his internally felt force, or collective effervescence, is each individual’s experience of the deity, which is an energy generated by the group itself. This function of community organization and empowerment is also undoubtedly an affirmation of Hindu identity, a source of community pride, and a visible form of organization and solidarity, which offers community members a feeling of security.” (Rodrigues, 2003)

“I think *Durga Puja* encourages community fellow feelings among the followers of Hinduism and the people from other religions. The whole community goes into a festive mood. The morning time is restricted for religious rituals. However, in the evenings, you will find that people from various communities and religions visit from shrine to shrine. Such practices enhance good relationships among community members.” (Interview with Papon in August 2021)

The Changing Trends in Conceptualizing Durga

As scholars argue, in the contemporary period, the religious aspects of the ritual are overshadowed by the idea of lavish entertainment followed by luxurious lighting and decorations. So, the transition from household worship to public worship is marked by the concept of consumerism. An ongoing community competition regarding organizing the festival began to be observed. Business transactions, company sponsorships, popular entertainment and folk

performances became integral to the celebration. Whereas village ‘pujas’ were attentive to the correct version of the rituals, the urban festivals have become a blend of tradition and modernity with significant changes through appropriation. In recent years, the changing facets of the festivity have reached a meta-theatrical level:

“In fact, we notice a simulacrum in this puja pyāndel (the shrines) in the Baudrillardian sense. Much before the actual *pūjā*, *pyāndel* makers start their work. They create large buildings or temples or palaces mainly out of perishable materials. These are not real but carry the sense of hyper real. Baudrillard wrote that contemporary cultural productions are itself hyperreal. These structures often bring before us a world that is not an actual replica of some real thing, but the perfect depiction of the order of reality...it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” (Bandyopadhyay, 2017)

Though the idea of national and communal identity was crucial in celebrating Durga puja within the modern urban context, with the hybridization of the ritual, the socially constructed notion of identity has got a space to be tested and re-tested. In 2015, the city of Calcutta in India witnessed the first Durga puja having an idol representing a transgender person. It marked a historic moment in the city’s otherwise conservative society. The worshipping of Durga in the transgender form was a resistance against the ignorance towards the gender fluidity of Bengali society. The non-heterosexual and trans identities are not invisible in traditional Hindu culture and mythologies. Within the dominant patriarchal discourses, they have always been silent. To break with the socially constructed banalities, Durga has been worshipped in the transgender form creating a space for non-binary identities and giving voice to the queer community of society (HuffPost India, October 15, 2015). Through the blurring and blending of tradition, modernity, reality and fiction, *Durga Puja* in the present time provides a rightful space for individual choices establishing that, “Durga is no longer a part of the stream of Bengali life, no longer identified with the land of Bengal conceived as a mother, she is an intrusion, almost imported...” (Bandyopadhyay, 2017):

“At the local community level in Bangladesh, the traditional representation of Durga is still dominantly visible during the festival. I have not seen much difference in the representation of Durga in other places as well. However, experimentation with the appearances of the idols is observed in big cities. I have seen where Durga is presented alone, without her family. There are also instances of presenting Durga without putting sindoor on her forehead. I am unaware of any transgender portrayal of Durga during the festival in Bangladesh. However, you never know! The changing trends indicate people’s aspiration to explore Durga afresh while coming out of traditional discourses.” (Interview with Kushol in August 2021)

Conclusion

While shedding light on the popular and sacred narratives about Durga, this paper explores the possible social and cultural meanings that those narratives carry to the Bengali Hindu community of Bangladesh. Considering discourse analysis, this paper elaborates on how the myth of Durga works in various narrative discourses and ultimately shows its effectiveness in everyday life. Focussing on the idea of performance, this paper analyzes the ritualistic performances surrounding Durga, concentrating on the social and cultural significance of those performances. While considering the changing social trends in those ritualistic performances, this paper finally analyzes the shifting position of Durga from a mother goddess to an individualized entity in the contemporary period. Hence, such changes provide spaces for alternative interpretations of the dominant sacred narratives.

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